5 Recognize Target Audience Culture As an Operational Environment

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The social norms, values, customs, shared beliefs, and behaviors in a society all can influence how people make judgments about right and wrong, assess what is important, and suggest what to do and what not to do, as well as how and with whom.¹

Establishing an understanding of a target audience’s culture needs to be done at the outset of any operation. It is vital, as former U.S. ambassador to Latvia Brian E. Carlson has observed, to understand whether or how a topic that interests the United States engages a foreign audience and, if so, how and in what manner. That understanding helps to define how you will prioritize resources, what you both will and will not say or do, and the time frame and operational phases within which you will act.²

“Who are they?” Carlson asks as he analyzes cultures. “What do they think about a subject on which you wish to engage? Why do they think or feel that way? What do key words mean to them? Where do they get information on this subject? Who do they trust? Who do they listen to or follow? Are there gatekeepers whose ‘permission’ is required before the audience will act or change behavior?”³

In examining narratives to articulate for target audiences, psychological operations (psyops) experts Major Gregory S. Seese and Patrick Hanlon insightfully point out that understanding any target audience and influencing its behavior requires forging a narrative keyed to seven elements: 1) how the audience’s community was created; 2) what it believes; 3) what symbolizes it; 4) how it routinely behaves or responds to certain situations; 5) the words its members use to describe themselves and what they do; 6) who they are and never want to become; and 7) who leads them.⁴

**Historical Example**

**Pearl Harbor.** Just as with bin Laden, Admiral Isoroku Yamamato and the Japanese misjudged America’s character and will to fight. Pearl Harbor was Japan’s version of a shock and awe strategy. Hoping to cripple the United States’ spirit and frighten Americans by communicating the message that Ja-
pan was all-powerful, Japan expected Americans to pressure their government to negotiate a settlement with Japan. At no point did it occur to Japan that Americans would stand and fight. That was critical to Japan’s strategic thinking, as many Japanese leaders doubted they could win a prolonged war. Their misjudgment provoked World War II. The Japanese mistake came from drawing the wrong lesson from Japan’s 1905 war with Russia, when the same strategy succeeded.

One notes again that at the outset of World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt confronted precisely the same challenge, as he maneuvered through sophisticated communication strategy—manifest in his words and deeds—to create a situation in which Japan fired the first shot, insulating Roosevelt from any charge that he had provided a pretext that forced Japan into conflict. Roosevelt knew that Americans needed to be united, but unifying the country, in his view, would have been impossible unless peace proponents agreed that America was the aggrieved party.⁵

Modern Examples

Somalia and General Anthony Zinni. Never presume you know what is best for people in another society. Do not apply Western values or worldviews. Look at the world through the eyes of the foreign audiences you deal with. Operating successfully in a clan-dominated society such as Somalia, General Zinni pointed out that knowing how they operate and interact with one another is vital. Somalis have no concept of individual responsibility. Only the clan can accept responsibility.⁶ That had important consequences when a decision was made to announce a $25,000 reward for Mohamed Farrah Aidid’s capture. It was foolish. Somalis interpreted it as a declaration of war on an entire clan, not a plan to constrain one individual. The avoidable Blackhawk Down incident flowed directly from the failure of leaders subsequent to Zinni to recognize that reality.

Lesson: When entering a different cultural environment, set aside Western preconceptions. Think differently. Think about the local culture, history, and norms, and how actions will affect people and their anticipated response. Do not think like an American. Think like someone who lives and breathes the culture of the target audience.

11 September 2001 and Osama bin Laden. Osama bin Laden thought that attacking the Twin Towers in New York City would galvanize Americans to pressure the U.S. government to get out of what bin Laden defined as Muslim lands. Instead, bin Laden provoked an all-out war that led to his death.⁷ He drew the wrong lesson from the October 1983 attack on U.S. Marines in Beirut, which killed 241 American servicemembers and caused President Ronald W. Reagan to withdraw the U.S. military from the city.⁸ Bin Laden deluded himself into believing that pressuring the United States by inflicting casualties on its troops or killing civilians would cause the nation to back away from a fight. Instead, Americans embarked on a no-holds-barred effort to hunt him. Far from achieving his goal, bin Laden became the most-wanted criminal on the planet while alienating his Taliban hosts, whom he double-crossed after promising Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar not to take action that would cause problems for him.⁹ Americans did track down bin Laden and kill him, fulfilling a pledge to do so, no matter where he was or how long it took.¹⁰

Lesson: Use communication strategy to make clear to an adversary that the cost of opposing or attacking your forces exceeds any de-
sired benefit. Communication strategy must anticipate how adversaries may perceive—and misjudge—your intentions. That hinges on developing as complete an understanding of an adversary as possible. Effective communication strategy can play a pivotal role in deterring or preventing conflict.

**Corollary:** Increasingly, the emergence of hybrid warfare is leading to the use of weaponized social media to advance political or military objectives. In 2016, Russia meddled in U.S. elections. One option that President Barack Obama considered and declined to approve was using computer malware for offensive or retaliatory action. The option remains on the table in surmounting future challenges. A critical challenge lies in the danger of rapid escalation. Prudent use of malware may well argue for communicating with an adversary ahead of time as to the risks it exposes itself to through cyber warfare. For example, the United States in theory might caution Russia that hacking into election machinery to alter outcomes or voter registration rolls may prompt an attack on a Russian power grid or some other target. It is important to define limits on the use of cyber tools, because the escalatory risks can prove enormous. In that context, cyber tools should be seen as potential elements of information warfare.\(^{11}\)

**Somalia and Ethiopia, 2006.** First, the United States supported brutal warlords in Somalia because they postured themselves as anti–al-Qaeda. But the warlords alienated Somalis and the Mogadishu business community, accomplishing this under the auspices of a so-called Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism. Supporting warlords backfired on the United States, however. Somalis responded by establishing the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). The ICU quashed the warlords and restored order, amid a raft of hostility toward the United States.\(^{12}\)

Then the United States supported Ethiopia’s invasion of Somalia to oust the ICU. Relations between Ethiopia and Somalia had been tense for many years. Many believe that the United States misread the situation and the Somali population’s likely response to intervention.\(^{13}\) Ousting the ICU gave rise to Al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate that used antiforeigner sentiment to recruit and mobilize an extremist army that terrorized and brutalized the population.\(^{14}\)

**Lessons:**

1. **Facts on the ground trump any communication strategy; and actions are a key element of strategic communication.**

   Backing the warlords was a mistake. Be careful about the allies you choose and how populations perceive these allies and your actions, whether direct or indirect.

2. **Ill-judged action may worsen the situation.**

   The Ethiopian troops were accused of brutality in their own right, compounding Somali hostility and compromising any chance that an antiextremist message to the mostly Sufi Somalis might resonate.

**Analogy:** At this writing, Syria is torn by civil war. Its brutality is evident in the high numbers of civilians who have been killed. One striking feature of the conflict is that both Bashar al-Assad’s government and certain Sunni rebels appear to have committed atrocities. Arming the rebels with heavy weapons may have been a good idea, but once ISIS appeared on the scene and presented a common enemy to other Sunnis, rebels...
against the regime who ostensibly repre-
sented pro-Western forces intermixed with 
those such as Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front) or Hay’et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 
which identified with al-Qaeda, and the 
parties were known to swap weapons.¹⁵

Panama. General Manuel Noriega misread Amer-
ican will when his troops murdered Marine Corps 
First Lieutenant Robert Paz and beat up a Navy 
lieutenant and his wife (who was also sexually 
harassed). Noriega presents an interesting case of 
arrogance blinding a ruthless, street-savvy leader. 
In 1970, Noriega was a rising figure in the Pana-
manian military. Media reports claimed that the 
U.S. government had recruited him as an asset 
but removed him in 1977 after he got involved 
in drug trafficking. According to media reports, 
the United States reengaged after the Sandinistas 
gained power in Nicaragua. Apparently, Noriega 
also acted as a double agent for Cuba and the San-
dinistas, fueling tensions with the United States. 

In 1989, Noriega annulled a presidential elec-
tion that Guillermo Endara had won, a move that 
prompted President George H. W. Bush to beef up 
U.S. forces stationed in the Panama Canal Zone. 
On 16 December 1989, an off-duty U.S. Marine 
was shot to death at a Panamanian Defense Force 
roadblock.¹⁶ Bush responded by launching Op-
eration Just Cause, which ousted Noriega on the 
grounds that he threatened Americans living in 
Panama and the security of the Panama Canal.¹⁷ 
Noriega surrendered, was taken to the United States and tried for drug trafficking, and was 
handed a 40-year jail sentence.¹⁸

Lesson: There is a corollary to 9/11. It is im-
portant to communicate the cost of commit-
ting hostile actions against the United States. 
The use of loudspeakers to blare music at 
Noriega once he sought refuge in an emb-
sassy offers a good example of psyops (today 
called MISO)—a communication strategy—
to force a party out from hiding or a refuge.

2003 Iraq War. This conflict serves as a case study 
for the need to understand how the physical envi-
ronment (geography), history, social organization, 
religion, beliefs and values, and the economy con-
fluently influenced what strategy offered the best 
opportunity for success.¹⁹

Lesson: The failure of Coalition forces and 
leaders such as Paul Bremer to understand 
these factors and how the social and political 
dynamics they generated caused frustration 
and nearly the defeat of Coalition forces.

Endnotes
1. See Col Hershel L. Holiday, USA, “Improving Cultural 
Awareness in the U.S. Military” (master’s strategy research 
2. Ambassador Brian Carlson, interview with author.
3. Ambassador Brian Carlson, interview with author.
4. Patrick Hanlon and Maj Gregory Seese, “Deconstructing 
Narratives: Using Primal Branding to Design Oppositional 
Narratives,” IO Sphere (Fall 2013). They astutely state that 
psyops’ mission is to influence behavior, not just attitudes 
and that behavioral change lies at the root of the psyops 
mission.
5. See Strange, Capital “W” War, for an excellent description of 
Roosevelt’s strategy. In his book, MajGen J. F. C. Fuller offers 
a provocative analysis of Allied strategy leading up to and 
through World War II that provides an alternative—and 
highly critical—view of the strategies that Churchill and
Roosevelt adopted. Fuller argues these were naïve, created avoidable strategic debacles, and produced a Cold War stalemate instead of a clear-cut victory.

6. MajGen Anthony C. Zinni, “Non-Traditional Military Missions: Their Nature and the Need for Cultural Awareness and Flexible Thinking” in Strange, Capital “W” War, 266–68. Gen Zinni’s entire quote is worth repeating: “What I need to understand is how these societies function. What makes them tick? Who makes the decisions? What is it about their society that’s so remarkably different in their values, in the way they think, compared to my values and the way I think in my western, white-man mentality? My mentality, which has absolutely zero applicability here but which drives everything I do. My decision-making, my military way of METT and T [Mission, Enemy, Terrain and weather, Troops and support, and Time available], my way of building my synchronization matrix, my top-down planning, and my battlefield geometry—all is worth absolutely zip in this environment where the enemies are abstract: starvation, anarchy, and disorder. Where the problems you’re going to face have nothing to do with military operations which are a small piece, secondary to everything else. The situations you’re going to be faced with go far beyond what you’re trained for in a very narrow military sense. They become cultural issues; issues of traumatized populations’ welfare, food, shelter; issues of government; issues of cultural, ethnic, religious problems; historical issues; economic issues that you have to deal with, that aren’t part of the METT-T process, necessarily. And that rigid military thinking can get you in trouble. What you need to know isn’t what our intel apparatus is geared to collect for you, and to analyze, and to present to you. An assumption going in is that you know what’s best for them; that you’re trying to implant Jeffersonian Democracy, ultimately. Jefferson, Locke and Rousseau all have one thing in common in a place like Somalia—they’re three dead white men. End of discussion. So, try to implant these theories by all us great western nations, and you might have a little problem. If you don’t understand the tribal structure of the Kurds, if you don’t understand who Chaldeans are, and the Assyrian Christians, and Uzbeks, and Uzars; if you don’t understand Habr Gedir, and Issaq, and Abgals; if you don’t understand the complexity of the clans and their interrelationships in Somalia, you’re in trouble. And if you understood that there is no concept of individual responsibility in Somalia, then you wouldn’t do a stupid thing like put out an arrest warrant on Aideed and a $25,000 reward on his head. When you do this, you declare war on his clan. Only the clan can accept responsibility. And if they do, they pay a dia, in effect blood money, in payment of a wrong that they have accepted as a wrong that they have committed, or a member of their clan has committed. When you go fight them then, why is it that the women and kids are out in the street committing atrocities on American bodies? Because you went to war with the clan. You declared war on the clan. You’re there to eradicate the clan. Your enemy is Habr Gedir. And when you go to war with the clan, the whole clan fights. And you can’t understand that in a western context or a western view of the world. Because what you’re out to collect and what your decision process is all about is alien to that particular environment.” Emphasis original.

7. Dr. Fawaz A. Gerges presented his argument that while Osama bin Laden did not like the United States, the goal of 9/11 was less about ideology than to change the U.S. government’s attitude about maintaining a presence in these lands at the Sovereign Challenge Conference held at the U.S. Strategic Command in October 2005. He describes bin Ladeen’s miscalculation in his book The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 162–64. See also Farwell, The Pakistan Cauldron, 256–58, on the U.S. commitment to track down Osama bin Laden.


9. This point is documented in Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clarke, The Exile: The Flight of Osama bin Laden (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). They reported that bin Laden had arrived in Pakistan before the Taliban took power. Levy advised that Mullah Omar allowed bin Laden to remain but warned that al-Qaeda action such as the 1998 Nairobi bombing made him uneasy. Mullah Omar had specifically warned bin Laden against provoking the United States as a condition for offering Taliban hospitality. Bin Laden ignored the directive. Omar also had been tipped off that bin Laden was planning other global terrorist attacks, which especially angered him. His frame of mind was to allow Pakistan—as it was a Muslim state—to apprehend and seize bin Laden. After 9/11, the mood shifted. Even though the al-Qaeda shura had opposed the attack, Levy says there was a sense of euphoria about the harm inflicted on the United States. One reason that Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) encouraged Omar to refuse to turn over bin Laden was that ISI did not want to be perceived as turning over a new folk hero to the Americans.

10. The United States did not stop with bin Laden. U.S. forces have killed his cohorts in Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and anywhere they are found. “U.S. Kills al-Qaeda Suspects in Yemen”; and “Pakistan: U.S. Drone Kills Senior Al Qaeda Leader,” Associated Press, 9 December 2012.


12. Mazzetti, The Way of the Knife, chapter 8, 137–43. Mazzetti
reports that the U.S. government sent weapons and suitcases containing $200,000 to favored warlords.


17. Peter Eisner, “Manuel Noriega, the Invasion of Panama and How George H. W. Bush Misled America,” Newsweek, 18 March 2017. Eisner argues that Bush’s rationale was false and that Bush had no justification for the invasion. He reported that officials advised him privately that Noriega could be persuaded to leave office without an invasion. The author’s belief is that Bush was looking for an excuse to show the world that the United States was willing to assert its military power in an effort to end a perception emanating from the American withdrawal from Vietnam that it was reluctant to employ its military to advance or protect U.S. national security interests.


19. See Shultz, The Marines Take Anbar, 8–25. He observes that geography “is the starting point for understanding how and why” Iraqis see themselves. Shultz, The Marines Take Anbar, 11. The Marine Corps produced the Iraq Tribal Study, which stands out as a model for cultural analysis and helped decode the beliefs and values of the Sunni Arabs of al-Anbar Province. These were derived from Bedouin tribal traditions, Islam, and Arab culture and shaped Sunni identity. They affected self-perceptions and expectations and directly affected Sunnis’ hostility to foreign domination that helped fuel resistance to the Coalition, until the Coalition adapted its strategy to successful COIN tactics and capitalized on al-Qaeda mistakes to turn the tide in al-Anbar. See Lin Todd et al., Iraq Tribal Study—Al-Anbar Governorate: The Albu Fahd Tribe, the Albu Mahal Tribe, and the Albu Issa Tribe (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006).